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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the student population in the two year college, their problems, and the factors affecting their success. Stress, among these students, takes all kinds of different forms and is derived from all kinds of different sources. Today's students live in a world of casual isolation and anonymity; they do not have the family ties that many of their professors had when they were young, or the friends, or the financial support networks. Today's accepted model is individuality, singularity, anonymity, but with this individuality comes stress, a kind of stress that older adults have never really had to face. The paper quotes Dr. Martin Seligman who writes that severe depression is 10 times more prevalent today than it was 50 years ago and that sexual abuse is also increasing rapidly. These stressful conditions appear in college classrooms as behavior and motivation problems. It finds that stress makes a bad situation even worse; stress creates stupidity, whether behavioral, physical, or psychological. In an environment where education has become an economic commodity for "holding your own" amidst the changing technology, there is seldom the time, or opportunity, for building or burnishing the social skills, let alone the concept of community, that might help a student become a more complete person. Contains 5 notes and a 23-item bibliography. (NKA)

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The World in Our Own Image.

by David W. Bates

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The World in Our Own Image

I thought I'd start this conversation citing the current Governor of Minnesota, Jessie Ventura. He's raised a lot of hackles in saying the sexual harassment charges brought on by the Tailhook scandal were "much ado about nothing." Jessie is an ex-Navy Seal, an ex-professional wrestler, movie star, and currently Governor. If you listen to him speak, he's very bright, very quick, though often missing the finesse points. In talking about Tailhook and sexual harassment, Jessie is essentially saying that when you train people to violence that violence leaks out to every part of their lives. Soldiers are not just violent from 9-5; they're violent in their sex lives, with their children, with their bankers, brokers, aunts. Jessie says: "*You* created this Frankenstein [referring to American soldiers], then all of a sudden you're appalled" (Grobel 66). In his own gruff and "special" way, Governor Ventura isn't saying anything the American Psychological Association hasn't already said. Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman writes,

> The American Psychological Association's commission on violence and youth concluded in 1993 that 'there is *absolutely no doubt* that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior' (329).

Dave Grossman, in his book *On Killing*, goes on to document the studies that have been done on the introduction of television to Western rural communities, where television had not been available before: "In each case violent crime among children increased

spectacularly" (329). I don't know if you've paid any attention, but the movie that opens in the theatres across the nation today is called "Fight Club."[1]

I remember moving to Philadelphia years ago; I remember the night. I remember sitting in a hotel room, watching the 11:00 news, and there was this handsome little 4 year old, in a body cast, in a hospital bed, singing the Barney song. His parents had beaten him, broken both of his arms, both of his legs, doused him in gasoline, set him afire, and left him to die in the basement. A passer-by had seen him lying there, hence the ambulance and the hospital. If you've never been around children too much, the Barney song goes like this: "I love you; you love me; we're a happy family. . . ." This from the lips of a child whose parents had broken him and set him on fire, a "happy family." When I sat down to write this speech, I knew I wouldn't have to search far for an illustration of violence in the schools; I turned on the 5:00 news on Monday, October 4th; a 15 year old had shot his Assistant Principle at Bartram High School in Philadelphia (Gibbons 1), and the media focus was over the lack of metal detectors in the schools (Gibbons 10). The problem is not the lack of metal detectors in the schools.

I live in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Violence has become ubiquitous; the events of Littleton, Colorado, or even Bartram High School in Philadelphia, speak to the effect of alienation, aggression, tension, stress, conflict, on our students. I wanted to speak to the hidden stressors around us, the effects of these stressors and how I have tried to cope with them. Daniel Goleman in *Emotional Intelligence* writes that aggression in children is learned (197-99), and that it is passed from generation to generation (though not necessarily within the same family). Goleman argues that children who have been

[1] Friday, October 15th, 1999.

abused, abuse when they themselves become adults (*Emotional Intelligence* 198), and this brings us back to Jessie Ventura's Frankensteins, and *our* role in their creation.

Stress, among our students, takes all kinds of different forms, is derived from all kinds of different sources. One of my young freshmen, just before I left to come here, repeated this refrain I have heard over and over again throughout my teaching career, the message Jonathan Kozol puts forward *in Savage Inequalities*. He told me of his "hatred," real hatred, for high school. He spoke to me of having been warehoused by the public education system, "locked away in the basement," is the way he put it; he spoke of enduring the disdain of his peers, his teachers. He is and was dyslexic. Today, he is a member of the honor society. He's a really impressive young man, who also happens to have a learning disability, working daily to overcome the limitation, but Ellen Langer, a psychologist teaching out of Harvard, tells us dyslexics are often more aware, more "mindful," than people we might usually call "normal" (123). They don't necessarily have the same skills others have, but they have learned to learn despite the difference. Regardless of his latent ability, Jared has had to spend the last few years learning he *can* succeed where he had been taught he could only fail. Isolation, stress, tension, aggression, this is the world of the students I see day-to-day, although it's usually the problems that end-up in my office.

I'm going to read a short excerpt about stress and college that came out *in The Philadelphia Inquirer* on December 13th, 1998:

> [Headaches, nausea, sleeplessness, irritability and eating disorders] are symptoms of stress and all [these maladies], according to campus officials and counselors are being found in increasing numbers of students.

> In the last decade, they say, more students have arrived at college barely able to cope when the pressure builds.
>
> "We are seeing today's college students having the problems that you might expect a 40-year-old executive to have, from stomach disorders to headaches," said Fred Newton, director of counseling services at Kansas State University. . . (Vigoda A1).

The article goes on to say the reason "why this generation seems more stressed than in the past" lies in "the breakdown of the traditional family," "students raised on television and video games," the "de-emphasis on reading," money problems, "[b]roken homes" (Vigoda A1). Felton Earls, a child psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, adds "the small amount of time children spend with adults" (Stepp A17). Deborah Tannen writes much the same thing in *The Argument Culture*, citing e-mail, the internet, and electronic communication as limiting face-to-face interaction and contributing to violence. She states, "the rising level of public aggression in our society seems directly related to the increasing isolation in our lives" (254-55). We live in a country that is increasingly composed of isolated, solitary, individuals, not family, not friends.

I live in a condo within walking distance of the College where I teach, and I couldn't tell you the names of my neighbors. I know two of my neighbors have been there as long as I have, at least 7 or 8 years. I speak to them every now and then, but I don't know their names, and I don't ask. My students live in this same world of casual isolation and anonymity, and it's to this anonymity that I attribute this tendency on the part of my students to come into my office, sit down, and talk of breast cancer, sexual abuse, attempted murder, wives and children used as decoys in drug deals (this

surprisingly often), other things. They don't have the family ties that I had when I was a young man, or the friends, or the financial support networks. They're out there alone. They grew up in families where both parents work, where their uncles and aunts might live 3 states away, where their neighbors and childhood friends move every 3 or 4 years. They were trained to an insular individuality, but it's this very insularity that allows for no mistakes.

Urie Bronfenbrenner, out of Cornell University, writes, "In the absence of good support systems, external stresses have become so great that even strong families are falling apart. The hecticness, instability, and inconsistency of daily family life are rampant in all segments of our society; including the well-educated and well-to-do. What is at stake is nothing less than the next generation, particularly males, who in growing up are especially vulnerable to such disruptive forces as the devastating effects of divorce, poverty, and unemployment. The status of American children and families is as desperate as ever. . . . We are depriving millions of children of their competence and moral character" (Goleman *Emotional Intelligence* 233-34).

Today it is a sign of *in*ability to live with your parents, brothers, sisters, to not be out-on-your-own, individually. When I was a young man, I never felt that way. As an adult on various occasions, I stayed with my parents, my brothers, for six months, eight months at a time. When my father was a young man, he stayed with his parents, his brothers, his sisters, till his late 20s; he helped raise many of my 60 year old cousins, but today those kind of close family ties are becoming more rare. The accepted model is individuality, singularity, anonymity, but with this individuality comes stress, a kind of stress I've never really had to face.

If I "fall," and I've fallen many times in my adult life, my family spreads a safety-net underneath me to intercept me before falling *all* the way to the concrete down. I've fallen hard in my life, but I've *never* hit the concrete. My family has always been there. My little nephew, when he was 2 to 3, had this perverse philosophy that demanded he attempt to drown himself in the deep end of the pool, at every opportunity. He would come running from any direction, at any time, and hurl himself into the deep water, a formidable projectile, especially when you take into account the extra 20 pounds his super-absorbent diaper adds to his body-weight once he's been in the pool for awhile. If he'd ever hit the water, with that 20-pound, soaked, super-absorbent diaper wrapped around him, he would've sunk like a stone. We caught him every time, just as he expected us to.

My old social-psychology professor from Purdue, Dr. William Spencer, used to say that the difference between you and I and the homeless-people in the streets of Philadelphia is that the homeless have no friends, no one to spread that net for them, to catch them in the deep end of the pool, before they drown. *My* family, *my* friends, spread this net for me to keep *me* from falling-down. Increasingly, my students have no social net, and the problems of an isolated individuality rock them to the concrete down. Individuals are much more fragile than groups, much more subject to fail, and the stress of walking the high-wire without a net means you can't make *any* mistakes.

Is it any wonder that Martin Seligman, teaching out of the University of Pennsylvania, writes that severe depression is 10 times more prevalent today than it was

50 years ago.[2] If you work that out in you head, that's a 100% increase in the incidence of severe depression every 5 years for the last 50 years (*Learned Optimism* 10).

When I was growing-up there was a neighborhood around me, and the mothers, fathers, brothers of my friends watched-out for all of us. We *talked* to strangers. A few years ago I had gone to the grocery store with my father, and there was this little fellow sitting in a grocery-cart waiting for his mother, and he smiled, kicked-out his feet and said, "Hi," his bright eyes just beaming, handsome little fellow that he was. And I said "Hi" to the little fella, and as we walked away my father admonished me not to do this anymore; He said, "You don't want to teach the little ones to talk with strangers." And he was right. Not only do we live in insularity, we create that insularity around us, for all the best reasons. The Harvard Sociologist, Robert Putnam, in his well known text "Bowling Alone," tells us Americans are becoming less and less social (65).[3] A "stranger" *in a close-knit "community"* is only a friend you haven't met, yet. In a society of loosely conjoined individuals, a stranger is a much more problematic concept. Robert Putnam suggests we could look at our communities today as composed of "any two Red Sox fans. . . : they root for the same team and they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other's existence" (70). If you've been to a baseball game lately, how much trust would *you* put in the fellas sitting next to you? Would you let them watch your car keys;

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[2] Martin Seligman is a recent past President of the American Psychological Association.

[3] "Many students of the new democracies that have emerged over the past decade and a half have emphasized the importance of a strong and active civil society to the consolidation of democracy. Especially with regard to the postcommunist countries, scholars and democratic activists alike have lamented the absence or obliteration of traditions of independent civic engagement and a widespread tendency toward passive reliance on the state. To those concerned with the weakness of civil societies in the developing or postcommunist world, the advanced Western democracies and above all the United States have typically been taken as models to be emulated. *There is striking evidence, however, that the vibrancy of American civil society has notably declined over the past several decades* [my emphasis]." Putnam,

would you even let them watch your beer? In a society where Daniel Goleman tells us sexual abuse accelerates at a rate of 10% a decade (*Emotional Intelligence* 257), how much trust would *you* put in a "stranger"? So, the incidence of social distance, the devaluation of Putnam's concept of "social capital," might tend to replicate itself in the absence of even minor levels of trust.

When I was growing up I really didn't have to worry about someone doing harsh things to me while I waited in a grocery cart for my mother. I grew up in a community, and everyone in that community watched out for everyone else; now this often meant you didn't have the privacy I have today, a privacy similar to isolation, but there was always someone there to catch you, if you fell, skinned your knees, needed a doctor. I always had a mother or a family-member there to watch after me, always. Daniel Goleman writes, "Social isolation. . . doubles the chances of sickness or death," and I was taught, as a part of my graduate degree in Education, that alienation, isolation, is the single most pernicious reason for failure in college (*Emotional Intelligence* 178).

Over the last few years, I've been the advisor of several student organizations. In my experience, roughly 30-40% of the women in these organizations have reported suffering some form of abuse. This does not mean they're not intellectually or academically capable, people, but they often bring with them emotional baggage that is very difficult to work with or work through, and one of the things I've learned over the years is that *I* don't know what has happened in their lives, and that patience and understanding, simply waiting, is often the best thing I can do.

Robert. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6:1 (January, 1995): 65.

Three of my students in the last year have spoken to me of suicide, one of my more difficult student problems was arrested on four counts of attempted murder, and I live and work in one of the wealthiest counties in the nation. I suspect that what I have in my classes is what you have in yours, though you may not know it.

One of my students this semester wrote on violence as the topic of her term paper. She writes,

> . . . I grew up in a home with a physically destructive father and a mentally abusive mother. Sometimes, when my friends came to my house to play, my parents would fight. From the safety of my room, I could hear the familiar noises of my father beating up my mother, along with the usual screaming of obscenities. Scared, sometimes to tears, my friends would always insist on going home. No matter how hard I tried to convince them that my room was a secure zone, they never gave in to my pleas for them to stay. The life I knew, my friends found unbearable.

In my experience reflections like this are fairly common. Wealth is no insurance against violence. In Bucks County, Pennsylvania in 1996 there were about 7,000 births; the same year, the same county, 15,000 women became victims of domestic violence (Niehoff 1). *I'm* an English Professor; you do the math: 7,000 births into 15,000 victims of domestic violence. What does that come to?

When I was a young teacher and my students used to tell me these things, sexual abuse, harassment, I used to just chalk-it-up to exaggeration. No more. Daniel Goleman in *Emotional Intelligence* writes that 20-30% of American women will experience sexual abuse by age 17, and he says that the incidence is growing at a rate of 10% a year (257);

that's 100% a decade. Martin Seligman tells us the incidence of severe depression is increasing 100% every five years (*Learned Optimism* 10), the incidence of sexual abuse growing at a rate of 100% every decade, physical abuse, physical and learning disabilities, isolation, individuality, stress, stress, stress. Do you have behavior problems in your classes? Do you have motivation problems? Problems getting people to do things? Do you wonder why? My students are under stress, constant stress, just to survive, day to day. And they have no net to catch them, unless it's the one they weave themselves. And that has been one of the real purposes I have seen to teaching, to help my students' build their own social safety nets, from scratch.

One of my peers from Counseling came to speak to a couple of my classes on models of leadership; she was trying to communicate this idea that leadership is not about power but cooperation. She wanted to get the students to see that leadership is really about guiding, encouraging, facilitating people to work together within groups. She broke our meeting down to five groups of students. She gave them this project, this puzzle, to resolve in a limited amount of time, and the puzzle required group interaction and cooperation to solve. She assigned observer/referees to each of the groups to make sure that they wouldn't cheat, but also to report on how each group handled this problem of leadership in completing their project. Four of the five groups eventually solved the problem, but it amazed me to listen to the account of the observer of the group that did not succeed. The observer/referee, who'd watched this unsuccessful group, reported to us that the reason this group failed was because there were "*too many* leaders" in the group. I watched this group. They couldn't agree; they couldn't divide responsibility. They threw one member *out* of the group, who just happened to be that year's Academic All

American. But the observer/referee reported to us that the reason for the failure was the abundance of leadership. This woman saw leadership as dictatorial power and control, not cooperation, facilitation and interaction.

Is there any wonder to that? In a society that is becoming increasingly insular, where people have fewer and fewer opportunities to learn cooperative social skills, and fewer and fewer opportunities to practice these skills with a safety-net underneath them, is there any wonder that there should be increasing levels of aggression and stress (in an environment where one cannot afford to make mistakes, where there is no forgiveness), increasing levels of conflict, increasing levels of misunderstanding (where there is neither the time nor the patience to allow for difference), is there any wonder, aggression, sex, drugs, violence, disdain? Goleman says "stress makes people stupid" [my emphasis] (*Emotional Intelligence* 149). It causes them to act erratically and ineffectively. It allows no time for consideration. Stress demands action, pure and simple, aggression, not contemplation. And *that* is what my students have learned: Leadership as aggression (in an age of sexual and physical abuse—surprise).

Martin Seligman writes about how people learn to fail (in life and in the classroom), but his emphasis is on how to overcome failure and succeed. Seligman uses a core empirical example to demonstrate learned helplessness. He cites a normal rat's ability to tread water for 60 hours before it drowns. A rat can swim for 60 hours before it drowns, unless you immobilize it, unless you hold it in your hand until it quits squirming and *then* release it into the water. Rats immobilized in your hand will drown within about 30 minutes after walking the plank. An unrestrained rat can tread water for better than 2 days (*Helplessness* 59). Seligman argues that the rats, trapped in your hand, have learned

they cannot succeed; they give-up and drown when faced with their own helplessness (Langer 53-54). Seligman argues human beings can be taught to be helpless in the same way as rats. Seligman writes,

> Extreme grinding poverty does produce helplessness, and it is a rare individual who can maintain mastery in the face of it. A child reared in such poverty will be exposed to a vast amount of uncontrollability. . . . I suggest that among its effects poverty brings about frequent and intense experiences of uncontrollability; uncontrollability produces helplessness, which causes the depression, passivity, and defeatism so often associated with poverty (*Helplessness* 159-61).

From the perspective of Neuroscience and physiology Robert Sapolsky writes much the same thing: "If you want to increase your chances of avoiding stress-related diseases, make sure you don't inadvertently allow yourself to be born poor" (*Why Zebras*. . . 18).[4]

I see this all the time in my students, all the time: sexual abuse, physical abuse, learning disability, social incompetence, threats of suicide, threats of violence, and I've been threatened multiple times as well (There's a certain efficacy or survival value to maintaining one's distance from the students.). At this point in my life I've received death threats in four states; so far as I can tell, all associated with education.

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[4] Sapolsky goes on to write, "If you want to see an example of chronic stress, study human poverty. . . . And of course being poor brings disproportionate amounts of psychological stressors as well. . . . The health risk of poverty turns out to be a huge effect, the biggest risk factor there is in all of behavioral medicine. . . . If you want to increase your odds of living a long and healthy life, don't be poor. Poverty is associated with increased risks of cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, ulcers, rheumatoid disorders, psychiatric diseases, and a number of types of cancer. . . . In the case of some of those diseases, if you cling to the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, it can mean five to ten times the prevalence compared with those perched on top. . . . As one example of this set of differences in health care delivery: the poorer you are judged to be (based on the neighborhood you live in, your home, your appearance), the less likely paramedics are to try to revive you on the way to the hospital" (*Why Zebras*. . . 300-03).

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If victimization/aggression is so counter-productive, then why wouldn't we realize this, as intelligent as we are, and stop it? Stressed induced displacement of aggression. Robert Sapolsky says that aggression *has* a utility to it, that aggression reduces stress, at someone else's expense. If you're stressed-out and you scream at someone who wasn't paying attention at a stop light, you feel better. Sapolsky describes this anecdotally as "[h]e's one of those guys who doesn't get ulcers, he gives them," and Sapolsky tells us human beings are wonderfully proficient at dissipating stress in this fashion (*Why Zebras . . .* 215). Anger creates a kind of explosion, an energy all of its own, and if you're constantly fighting depression, this energy could well be your life-line (Goleman *Emotional Intelligence* 59). Stress can create anger and acting on that anger, attacking the fella next to you, can reduce stress. I've come to see my students' aggression as self-preservation in a constantly stressed environment.

Stress makes a bad situation even worse; stress creates stupidity, whether behavioral, physical, psychological, whatever. Stress, either continual or in more than moderate amounts, creates the conditions for failure. It breeds aggression and replicates itself.

In an environment where education has become an economic commodity for "holding your own" amidst the changing technology (Spring 198-99), there is seldom the time, or opportunity, for building or burnishing the social skills, let alone the concept of community, that might help one become a more complete person (Fromm 76-77). Robert Putnam writes, "Every year over the last decade or two, millions more [Americans] have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities" (68). One often becomes more technically proficient and less socially able, in tandem. In *The Myth of the Machine*,

Lewis Mumford writes of the effects of specialization, of withdrawing into more and more narrow areas of knowledge, "to know more and more about less and less is in the end simply to know less and less" (181). The specialization that we require of our students, whether in Business or other disciplines, does not make for complete, functioning, human beings. It makes for dependence, interdependence if you want.

The very concept of community assumes interaction, neither grudging nor belabored, but not dependence; community assumes constructive engagement, conversation, persuasion, respect, the willingness to take the time with a student who might never graduate, *because* she is a member of the community. Community belies cost effectiveness, profit, or the survival of the fittest business ethic. Community is both the willingness and the ability to choose community. Ultimately, and when they have a choice, people invest their time and resources where their values lie, but how much choice is there between work and school and family? How much disposable time to invest in the creation of community when you work 3 and 4 jobs *and* go to school, as some of my 30 and 40 year old students right now are doing, *while* trying to raise a family? Both parents working, who's at home if *I* put a fork in a light socket, as I did as a child? But all this with the best of intentions, to put their children through college.

Community presupposes cooperation, not competition, persuasion, not the recourse to power, but cooperation and persuasion demand time and respect, where the human element is more important than the profit, where time is *not* money. Robert Putnam, in "Bowling Alone," suggests that the lack of community, lack of concern for and interaction with other members of the community, is a cause of concern for the future of democracy in the United States. Where time is money instead of community, or the

opportunity to interact with others in the community, I suspect that increasingly we'll all be "bowling alone."

By way of conclusion I'd like to read you two contemporary accounts of American society, one from Charles Pellegrino, a very famous American astrophysicist, and an account of this year's Ryder Cup (an American golf tournament). Pellegrino on murder and academics:

> It's the more logical, bloodless, and officially uncounted murders that worry me. I've known only one person, during the past ten years, to die by what would officially be called murder. . . . During this same decade I've known at least two cases in which an employer tried to get out of paying benefits to near-retirement-age workers by deliberately, and with calculated precision, setting out to harass them into heart attacks. In one instance the victim had just returned to work after a triple bypass operation (in the business world, this is called 'just business'); I've known professors who ganged up on and mentally tortured a student for three years, then stood in the tearoom the day after he leaped from the eighth floor of a university building, joking about how the 'poor fool' couldn't even kill himself in the right way, for if he had jumped from a higher place, he would not have ended up screaming on the sidewalk for twenty minutes before he died (in the academic world, this behavior, though rare, is sufficiently commonplace to have a name: 'playing snap with your students') (106). . . .

Stephen Wilson reporting on the European perspective of American sportsmanship:[5]

> 'Let us be painfully honest about it,' columnist Matthew Norman wrote in the *London Evening Standard*. 'Yes, they are repulsive people, charmless, rude, cocky, mercenary, humorless, ugly, full of nauseatingly fake religiosity, and as odious in victory as they are unsporting in defeat.
>
> The only good thing to be said in favor of the American golfers, in fact, is that, at golf if at nothing else, they are better than the Europeans' (F7).

Violence is not segmented to only certain situations. Once initiated, it bleeds over into everything.

Jessie Ventura says "gun control" is "[b]eing able to stand there at 25 meters and put two rounds in the same hole" (Grobel 62). If that's the case, providing more and better metal detectors for Bartram High School will only address *where* the violence occurs, not the violence itself. Essentially Seligman and Putnam, say "we" have allowed this to happen, the casual acceptance of social violence, not the anonymous "they." Either through our own avarice (Seligman), or apathy (Putnam), "we" have allowed/created the conditions that promote this violence. It remains to be seen whether we have the will to reverse the process, or whether we will be *forced* to perpetuate it.

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[5] Just to show this is not a random accounting, on Sunday the 10th of October Anthony Gargano reports the Philadelphia Eagles fans cheered when an opposing player was removed from the field on a stretcher. Gargano reports one of the fans as saying, "The only thing that would have made me happier is if it would have been a coffin, not a stretcher, coming out" (A6).

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